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ABSTRACT

This paper presents guidelines for learning-disabled students who are in the process of selecting a college or university. Guidelines include being aware that specially designed programs for the learning disabled are still unusual, that institution size may not be an important factor, that a certification of disability may be required to receive special support services, that choice of classes and major field is important, and that support services are usually described in the college catalog. The value of visiting a prospective college is stressed, and general and specific questions to ask are suggested concerning university policies, instructional modifications, and socioemotional accommodations. These questions are used to structure a college selection checklist. (DB)

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ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

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Changes in College Access

It has been a decade and a half since the passage of the first major legislation mandating equal rights for the handicapped, and increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities are deciding to take advantage of the opportunities for higher education first created by Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act and continued by the Americans with Disabilities Act. As disabled high school students make decisions to attend college, it is important that students, their families, teachers, and counselors give special attention to the college selection process in order to afford students the greatest opportunity for academic success.

While it is important that disabled students be prepared for the new situations and academic styles they will encounter at institutions of higher learning, it is equally important that universities are prepared to accept and accommodate special needs. This is not yet universal in higher education. Even now, the level of readiness to accommodate learning disabled students varies greatly from campus to campus. I recently surveyed community and four-year colleges and universities in Washington

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State to determine their ability to serve the special needs of learning disabled students (Clem and Hauskins, in process). During this survey, I quickly discovered that colleges are somewhat disparate in their readiness to deal with the needs of the learning disabled. Other writers who have made similar surveys in other parts of the United States have also found that college programs and services to learning disabled students are uneven in quality (Johnston, 1984, Shaw and Norlander, 1986).

I have developed some guidelines that highlight areas of importance to learning disabled students as they select a college or university. By gathering this information in advance from several schools, it should be possible to find a campus that will meet the student's needs. The following suggestions may help in this process.

Guidelines for Selecting a College

First, while it is desirable to find a college that has a program directly geared for learning disabled students, it is not absolutely essential to do so if the student is reasonably self-reliant and will be able to arrange for outside help on his own. It is important to keep this in mind because at the present time, college-level programs, specifically designed for the learning disabled, are a bit unusual.

Second, the size of the university does not necessarily dictate its suitability for students with learning problems.

While many feel that students would be better accommodated on a small campus, they may be quite successful in a large university if that institution has a well-functioning support system for disabled students.

Third, a college may require certification of disability before students can qualify for special support services. In this case, students may have to provide a recent diagnosis of learning disability from a certified psychologist or physician (once enrolled, the university may assist students in this process).

Fourth, the choice of classes and major field is as important as the choice of the university. Since matching major field choice to the skills and interests of students is essential to success, it is important that students have access to career counseling before they reach the university or soon after.

Fifth, the support services available for handicapped students will usually be mentioned in a college's catalog and so handicapped students should request catalogs from several possible universities early in the junior or senior year of high school. This material should be read carefully because many questions can be settled at this point. Disabled students should particularly notice if there is an office that acts as a liaison between exceptional students and the rest of the campus since they will find a significant advantage is such an office exists.

Arranging a Visit

At least two academic quarters before enrollment, students should visit college they have chosen. This visit should be set up in advance by arranging for a scheduled appointment with both a representative of the office of disabled student services and an academic advisor from the academic department where students plan to do most of their work. These meetings may be more successful if students can be accompanied by a family member or some other responsible advisor.

During these appointments there are both general and specific questions that should be covered. Questions should be asked about university policy:

1. Is academic counseling available?
   Will students get direct help in determining both course load and specific course selection? Specifically, who will help? Where are these resources on campus? Are they available throughout the year?
2. Is special tutorial help available for learning disabled students? Will students pay for this help or will the university either provide the help or assist in finding funds for this purpose?
3. Are there special courses provided for learning disabled students? Does the college offer courses in study skills, or in tool areas such as composition or spelling? Some colleges are responding to the needs of learning disabled

students with just such assistance but students may not find out about this help unless they ask.

4. What about entrance requirements? For example, will a college that has entrance requirements such as competence in a foreign language for admission waive such requirements for students with learning disabilities? It is important to remember that colleges are not required to lower their entrance standards for learning disabled students, but should be prepared to offer disabled students alternate ways to demonstrate their competence. A student might, for example, request the untimed version of the Scholastic Aptitude Test before entry, and continue to have alternatives in testing throughout college programs.

Instructional Modifications

With regard to classes, these questions should be raised about the kinds of instructional modifications that are possible:

1. Are learning disabled students allowed to tape record all lectures, or must this be arranged individually with each professor?
2. Are notetakers available? Does the office for disabled students arrange for them, or must arrangements be handled by the student?
3. Are published lecture notes available for popular or required classes?
4. Will students be assisted in obtaining a

reduced reading load, text readers, taped texts, or other special instructional modifications?

5. Will learning disabled students be allowed extra time to complete examinations and written course work? In my survey I learned that this provision is by no means as universal as one might suppose.
6. Will the college alter exam criteria for disabled students? May they take oral exams or exams that have been modified to suit individual reading or writing abilities? May tests be taken separately in a quiet, non-distracting environment if this is needed or may students mark directly on tests rather than having to use separate answer sheets?

Socio-emotional Accommodations

Questions regarding socio-emotional accommodations for learning disabled students should also be raised. Some points to discuss would include:

1. Does the college have a support group that includes learning disabled students? Low self-esteem and poor response to social cues often cause problems for handicapped students in social situations. Since these problems make it difficult for disabled students to make friends and obtain the social support they require (Hallahan, Kauffman and Lloyd, 1986, Barbaro, 1982), it is essential that students be helped to build a support system.

2. If students encounter academic or emotional difficulties, does the college have a counseling center where they may obtain support and advice?
3. Do students have friends who are already going to the chosen college who can help with the adjustment process? Many a freshmen has been grateful for an old friend in the new college environment.
4. Finally, notice whether the disabled students' representative and the faculty advisors seem interested and committed to students success. If a school does not have a representative for disabled students and faculty advisors are unavailable or unhelpful, this may not be the best choice for the learning disabled student.

Even if a university cannot give an unqualified "yes" to all these questions (and will be able to do so), the college may still be a good choice for the learning disabled student if faculty and staff are knowledgeable, warm and caring.

The following checklist, when added to the prospective students' overall impression of the college environment may simplify comparison of colleges and help the selection process.

COLLEGE SELECTION CHECKLIST

Name of College: _____

	YES	NO
A) General		
Disabled students office?	___	___
Phone: _____		
Name: _____		
Advisor available?	___	___
Academic counseling available?	___	___
Tutoring available?	___	___
Special courses available?	___	___
Study skills?	___	___
Math lab?	___	___
Spelling lab?	___	___
Other?	___	___
Entrance requirements adjustable?	___	___
Untimed version of SAT?	___	___
Language requirement?	___	___
B) Instructional modifications		
Can all lectures be taped?	___	___
Are notetakers available?	___	___
Are published lecture notes available for any courses?	___	___
Will extra time be allowed		
During exams?	___	___
For written papers?	___	___

Are exam modifications permissible? ___ ___

Oral exams instead of writing? ___ ___

Quiet environment? ___ ___

Modified test? ___ ___

Reading assignment modifications

Reduced reading assignments? ___ ___

Readers available? ___ ___

Taped textbooks available? ___ ___

C) Socio-emotional factors

Is there a support group for LD students? ___ ___

Does the college have a counseling center? ___ ___

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ABSTRACT

This article presents guidelines for learning disabled students to use in selecting the college/university that will offer the best opportunities for personal and academic development. Specific ideas are presented to help students in the selection process.